

Statement by Thomas C. Hubbard U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea

November 27, 2002

Thank you all for coming. I invited you here today in my capacity as my country's and my President's representative in Korea because I wanted to speak frankly and sincerely to you - and through you to the Korean people - about a tragedy that has weighed heavily on our minds and hearts over the past several months.

My colleague, U.S. Forces Korea Commander General LaPorte, is with me here because he wanted to share his thoughts on this tragedy with you as well. After we both have spoken, we will be happy to take your questions.

Five months ago, two young girls, full of the dreams and hopes of youth, were on their way to a birthday party when they were killed in a tragic accident by a vehicle operated by two U.S. servicemen participating in a joint exercise with our Korean allies.

Everyone who is a parent, Korean and American alike, understands that nothing can ever make up for the loss of a child, and that such a loss is the hardest thing a person can experience. The next hardest thing is to feel responsible for the death of a child. We feel that responsibility, hence our presence before you today, and we are trying to do everything that can be done to make amends, knowing that it can never be enough.

Reflecting back on my almost four decades as an American diplomat, if there is one thing I would wish to change, it is the tragic circumstance and fate that took these two young girls from us. When I heard about the accident on June 13th, I was deeply shocked, and I immediately called Foreign Minister Choi to convey both my sense of horror as well as the profound apologies of my government. I also conveyed to him my commitment that we would conduct a full investigation into the accident.

Since that tragic day, much has happened. After a thorough investigation, my military colleagues determined that there were grounds to bring charges against those who had operated the vehicle involved in the accident. As the investigation progressed, General LaPorte, then-8th Army Commander Lt. General Zanini, the 2nd Infantry Division Commander, and others from U.S. Forces Korea publicly and repeatedly expressed apologies for the tragedy. Secretary of State Colin Powell, himself a former battalion commander with the 2nd Infantry Division, used his meeting with Foreign Minister Choi to convey on behalf of my country his apologies for this incident.

Officers, soldiers (including one of the soldiers who operated the vehicle), chaplains, and family members from our military forces visited the families of the two girls - Ms. Shim Mi-Sun and Ms. Shin Hyo-Son - to apologize, to offer support, to try to console the families, and to bring news of the other steps that were being taken as we sought to make amends.

Our military forces conducted religious services for the two young girls; they lit candles in their memory; and they contributed their own funds to construct a memorial to them. Of course, we also took steps to provide compensation to the families.

The formal legal process - a Court Martial -- provided for by our system of military justice, recently ended with the acquittal of the two soldiers. The jury determined that there was insufficient evidence to prove criminal wrongdoing.

Those of you familiar with our legal system know that there was no way to presuppose the outcome of this trial, just as you know that our military juries do often convict their own. Our soldiers, as your soldiers would have been had they been involved in a similar incident overseas, were tried by a military tribunal. My government, like yours, subscribes to the principle that, since our soldiers have

no choice in where they serve, they deserve the normal legal protections that they would be accorded at home.

Recognizing the powerful concerns that this case had stirred up, the United States provided an unprecedented level of access to the trial by members of the Korean media, government officials, and NGO representatives, so that they could witness this process firsthand. I have been struck by the comments of observers that they indeed witnessed a fair and impartial procedure, even if they disagreed with the jury's judgment.

I know that many Koreans are disappointed by the verdicts and concerned that we somehow may attempt to move beyond the tragedy prematurely and inappropriately. I asked to meet with you today to assure the Korean people that is not the case. While the jury absolved the soldiers of criminal responsibility, the U.S. has not rejected its responsibility for this tragedy. We have an ongoing obligation to provide redress and to ensure that such a tragedy never recurs.

The verdicts concluded a judicial process, but they did not in any way bring an end to our deep sadness and regret. Americans, here in Korea and back in the United States, have been deeply affected by the tragic death of Mi-Sun and Hyo-Son. The fact that the girls died in an accident as we conducted the very training that our military does in order to preserve, protect, and defend the liberty of our Korean friends and allies makes their loss all the greater for us.

President Bush, who has visited Korea and has a special feeling for the Korean people, has been touched by this tragedy.

Just this morning, the President sent me a message asking me to convey his apologies to the families of the girls, to the Government of the Republic of Korea, and to the people of Korea. He asked me to express, and here I quote, "his sadness and regret over this tragic incident, and to reiterate the United States' commitment to work closely with the Republic of Korea to help prevent such accidents from occurring in the future."

Korean friends, our grief is profound and sincere. I mourn - we Americans mourn -- at the loss felt by the parents, friends, neighbors, and the Korean people. While nothing we can say or do will bring Mi-Sun and Hyo-Son back, while the pain and sadness we feel, deep as it is, cannot compare to that of their parents and friends, let me say to you from the depths of my heart that we will not forget the loss of these two beloved young girls.

As I have said, the verdicts do not bring an end to our responsibility and, as my President has stated, we will do whatever we can, working with your government, to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again. In a moment, I will ask General LaPorte to describe what we have done in this regard.

Let me close by proposing that we strive to draw an important lesson from our shared sorrow -- that we resolve to work even more closely as friends and allies to bridge those differences in culture and perception that sometimes cause misunderstanding between us. The relationship between our two countries - between our two peoples - is too important for us not to do so.

Finally, I want to again offer the profound apologies of my government and people to the parents of Mi-Sun and Hyo-Son and to the Korean people, and to ask again, humbly and with a heavy heart, for your understanding as we seek to do what we can to make amends.

Thank you.